



# "THE INVISIBLES": AN INSIGHT INTO THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE SANITATION AND ALLIED WORKERS IN INDIA

Ms. Sreeja G

Assistant Professor, Department of History and Political Science, SreeSankara College, Kalady, Kerala

## ABSTRACT

Sanitation work, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), encompasses tasks such as emptying toilets, pits, and septic tanks; entering sewers to fix or unblock them; transporting faecal waste; working in treatment plants; and cleaning public toilets or areas around homes. Sanitation workers provide an essential public service, often at the expense of their dignity, safety, health, and living conditions. This highly vulnerable, invisible, and unquantified segment of society faces severe occupational and environmental health hazards, which risk illness, injury, and death. The right to a clean, healthy, and safe environment is a non-derogable and inalienable fundamental right for every citizen, as guaranteed by Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. However, sanitation workers are frequently denied this right, as they risk their lives and safety to ensure that others can enjoy a safe and healthy environment. The right to live with dignity remains an unfulfilled dream for these workers.

This paper examines the occupational health risks faced by sanitation workers and highlights their socio-economic insecurities. Additionally, it explores the constitutional and legal safeguards provided to sanitation workers in India, aiming to shed light on their current plight and propose measures for their upliftment. Despite existing constitutional protections, such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, sanitation workers continue to face significant challenges due to weak enforcement and implementation of these laws. It emphasizes the need for effective policy interventions and societal recognition to improve the living and working conditions of sanitation workers, ensuring their rights and dignity are upheld.

**KEYWORDS:** Sanitation Workers, Manual Scavenging, Occupational Morbidity, Constitutional Provisions

## INTRODUCTION

Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees citizens the right to a clean, healthy, and safe environment, which is considered a basic inalienable right necessary for their overall development. This fundamental right is crucial for the well-being and growth of individuals and communities. However, sanitation workers, who risk their lives and safety to ensure that others enjoy a safe, healthy, and clean environment, are often excluded from this right. These workers provide essential public services at the cost of their dignity, safety, health, and living conditions, yet their contributions are seldom acknowledged by the state and society. They remain one of the most invisible and neglected sections of society, with their plight only coming to light when there is a failure in essential services or occasional media reports of sanitation worker deaths during the cleaning of sewers or septic tanks (WHO, 2018).

### Who Are Sanitation Workers?

Sanitation workers encompass all individuals responsible for cleaning, maintaining, operating, or emptying sanitation technologies at any stage of the sanitation chain. This includes toilet cleaners and caretakers in domestic, public, and institutional settings; those who empty pits and septic tanks; sludge handlers; sewer and manhole cleaners; and workers at sewage and faecal waste treatment and disposal sites (WHO, 2018). In India, a study by WaterAid identified nine categories

of sanitation workers along the sanitation service chain. These categories include those engaged in cleaning sewers, latrines, and those coming into direct contact with fecal sludge, railway cleaning, work in waste treatment plants, and cleaning public and school toilets, sweeping, drain cleaning, and domestic work. The Indian Railways is noted as the largest employer of sanitation workers, including manual scavengers (WaterAid, 2018).

### The Size of the Sanitation Workforce

The exact number of sanitation workers in India is often unknown due to conflicting data from various sources. A 2018 study by Dalberg Associates estimated that there are about 5 million sanitation workers across the country (Dalberg Advisors, 2018). In contrast, a survey by Safai Karmachari Andolan estimated the number at around 1.2 million. The 2011 Census of India reported 794,390 household-level insanitary latrines cleared by manual scavengers. The Socio-Economic Caste Census 2011 indicated that 182,505 families are engaged in some form of manual scavenging. Between 2002 and 2003, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment reported nearly 8,00,000 manual scavengers nationwide. In July 2019, a parliamentary response identified 54,130 manual scavengers engaged in the removal of night soil from 170 districts across 18 states (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2019). These varying estimates reveal the government's reluctance to

acknowledge the existence and plight of sanitation workers, leading to their continued invisibility.

### Challenges faced by Sanitation workers in India

The challenges and risks faced by sanitation workers include various dimensions:- Occupational and Environmental Health risk, social stigma and discrimination, financial insecurity, and weak legal protection.

### Occupational Morbidity among Sanitation Workers

Sanitation workers frequently come into direct contact with human waste without adequate protective equipment, exposing them to hazardous gases and biological and chemical agents in septic tanks, sewers, pumping stations, and treatment plants. Inhalation of toxic gases such as ammonia, carbon monoxide, and sulphur dioxide can be fatal (WHO, 2018). According to estimates, three sanitation workers die every five days in India. The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) revealed that at least 50 sanitation workers lost their lives while cleaning sewers and septic tanks in the first six months of 2019, averaging one death every five days. Between 2019 and 2023, at least 377 manual scavengers died from hazardous cleaning, according to government data (NCSK, 2019). The study conducted by the Center for Education and Communication (CEC) in 2005 with 200 sewage workers in Delhi found that there are only few workers beyond 60 years of age and a shocking decline of the number of manual scavenging workers beyond the age of 50. Various other studies reveal that there is a high morbidity rate among sanitation workers, including mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. Common physical ailments include tuberculosis, bronchitis, asthma, breathlessness, pneumonia, dysentery, cough, skin diseases, headaches, fatigue, gastroenteritis, musculoskeletal disorders, wounds, and cuts. Most sanitation workers operate without personal protective equipment and lack proper training or awareness of the occupational risks of their work (Centre for Education and Communication, 2005).

### Social Stigma and Discrimination

Dr B.R. Ambedkar aptly observed, "In India, a man is not a sanitation worker because of his work; he is a sanitation worker because of his birth, irrespective of whether he does sanitation work or not." This statement underscores the deep-rooted linkage between caste and the stigma attached to the occupation of sanitation workers. According to traditional caste codes, those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are considered 'pollutant' and 'impure,' and so are their occupations. Beyond occupational health risks, sanitation workers face social stigma and discrimination resulting from their caste identity and the nature of their work. Their dignity and labour rights are often violated (Ambedkar, B.R.).

Under the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS), the government identified 58,098 manual scavengers in 2018. Of these, 97.2% belong to the Scheduled Caste community. In September 2024, government data revealed that 92% of sanitation workers belong to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Communities, with 69% from the Scheduled Caste community

(Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2024).

### Financial Vulnerability of Sanitation Workers

Sanitation workers face significant financial insecurity due to the informal nature of their employment. They predominantly come from the lower-income segment of society and are often poorly and irregularly paid. Permanent sanitation workers receive better wages and benefits, such as provident fund, pension, and medical benefits, compared to contract workers, who typically earn only a quarter or half of a permanent worker's salary for the same job. A study by the Dignity Campaign Action for Liberation of Dalit Manual Scavenger Women in India (Jan Sahas, 2013) highlighted that women sanitation workers are often paid less and lack fixed wages in many areas. Most were paid less than 2000 INR per month, and half of the manual scavenging families had no other source of income. Only 2% of these families had landholdings, and only 1% were involved in agriculture for additional income. The study revealed that permanent Municipal Corporation workers received 150 INR per day, whereas contract labourers earned between 40 and 50 INR per day and had to work more than 8 hours a day (Jan Sahas, 2013).

### Legal and Institutional Challenges for Sanitation Workers in India

The Indian Constitution provides various provisions under the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles of State Policy to protect the basic rights of all citizens, including sanitation workers. The Preamble promises every citizen the right to live with human dignity. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of caste, religion, race, sex, or place of birth. Article 17 abolishes untouchability, and Article 21 promises the right to life and basic liberties, which can be interpreted to include the right to a clean, safe, and healthy environment. Additionally, Article 23 abolishes bonded labour. Collectively, these Fundamental Rights are intended to protect sanitation workers from exploitation by both the state and the public.

The Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) further promote and protect the socio-economic justice of the downtrodden sections of society. The DPSP directs the state to frame policies aimed at minimizing inequalities in status and income, providing adequate means of livelihood for all citizens, ensuring equal pay for equal work, guaranteeing just and humane conditions of work, and ensuring a living wage and decent working conditions. Furthermore, the DPSP emphasizes the need to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of weaker sections of the population, particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and to protect them from injustice and exploitation (The Constitution of India).

Beyond the constitutional provisions, several legislative safeguards exist to protect manual scavengers and sanitation workers from various forms of exploitation. Key legislative acts include:

- The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and

their Rehabilitation Act, 2013

- The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993
- The National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993
- The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989
- The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976
- The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955

These laws aim to eliminate manual scavenging, rehabilitate affected individuals, and safeguard their rights and dignity. For instance, the 2013 Act specifically prohibits the employment of individuals as manual scavengers and prescribes stringent penalties for violations (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2013).

Despite these constitutional and legal safeguards, sanitation workers often suffer due to weak legal protections and the lack of enforcement of existing rules. The government's efforts to abolish manual scavenging have largely been unsuccessful, and many individuals continue to engage in such hazardous work for their livelihood. Reports and studies highlight that sanitation workers remain vulnerable to exploitation, social stigma, and occupational hazards due to inadequate implementation of laws and policies (Ghosh, A., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Sanitation workers play a pivotal role in ensuring safe sanitation and maintaining a clean, healthy, and safe environment for all. However, they are often denied the basic right to live and work with dignity. Hazardous working conditions, low social and economic status, coupled with social stigma, discrimination, and insufficient legal protection, exacerbate their vulnerability. Despite constitutional and legal safeguards, as well as policies, schemes, and programs aimed at protecting sanitation workers, their plight remains largely unchanged. Acknowledgment and recognition of manual scavengers and their work are essential. The government must formalize their work by providing proper training and protective equipment for safe working conditions (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2013).

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